

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

FOR

**METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING PREDEFINED FEEDBACK**

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## Method and Apparatus For Providing Predefined Feedback

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### BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

#### Field of the Invention

The invention relates generally to the art of conducting e-commerce transactions over a network. More particularly, the invention relates to a method of providing feedback between users of an e-commerce site utilizing predefined sets of comments.

#### Background of the Invention

The emergence of electronic commerce has revolutionized the manner in which goods and services may be bought and sold. In particular, the development of online auctions conducted over the Internet have enabled individuals to sell items with relatively little effort or expense while at the same time reaching a much larger potential pool of buyers than using more traditional means such as classified advertising and garage sales.

In a typical online auction, a seller submits an offer to sell an item, the item becomes available for bidding for a predetermined period of time. Buyers are able to view a description and often an image of the item, and submit bids. The potential buyer who tenders the highest bid “wins” the auction provided his bid is in excess of any

minimum price required by the seller, and a contractual obligation is created in which the buyer and seller are required to complete the transaction.

It is the completion of the transaction, i.e., the exchange of the seller's item for the buyer's payment that is the potentially most perilous part of the transaction. More often than not, a buyer and seller are located far apart from each other, often in separate states or countries (from herein state or states unless otherwise stated shall refer to both states of the United States, as well as other countries or nations). Accordingly, the promised item and payment must be shipped via the post or some other package delivery service. A seller may request payment prior to shipping the item or the seller may require cash on delivery (COD). In either case, the buyer will not have the opportunity to verify the item was as the seller represented it, until after payment. The item shipped may end up being broken or in worse condition than represented; or if the seller is particularly unscrupulous, a dummy item may be shipped in place of the promised item. On the reverse, where a buyer pays with a check, he may stop payment on the check shortly after receiving the item, defrauding the seller of his item. Given the geographic distance between the typical buyer and seller and the relatively small values of the items being bought and sold, it is seldom practical for the aggrieved buyer or seller to seek recourse in the courts.

In order to combat the problem of dishonest and/or unscrupulous users, online auction services such as eBay, Inc. of San Jose, California, have instituted mechanisms to combat fraudulent and dishonest practices among buyers and sellers. For instance, eBay requires each user to register with the service before offering an item for auction or bidding on an item. In order to complete registration, the user must provide either a verifiable e-mail address (i.e., one that cannot be easily set up using a pseudonym) or a

credit card number. If eBay determines that a registered user is utilizing improper buying or selling practices, it can ban the user from using the auction facility in the future.

Another practice used by some auction services is to provide the buyer and seller with a feedback forum in which either user can leave comments about the other that may be of use to other users in the future in deciding whether to bid or sell from a particular user. Comments are typically positive, but a few negative comments can act to indicate a user that is not completely honest and who should be dealt with cautiously.

A representative example of a list of comments made about a user is provided in prior art Figure 1 (the e-mail addresses of the users have been masked). A score that is indicative of the user's trustworthiness with regard to online auction transactions is determined based upon the number of positive, neutral and negative comment the user has received. Comments about registered user may be entered into the system through a feedback forum or through a feedback prompt provided to the successful bidder and the auctioneer upon the conclusion of a particular auction transaction.

Prior art Figure 2 provides an example of a feedback screen that may be displayed to a user who desires to leave a comment about another user. The commenting user enters his or her ID into box 205, and his password into box 210. The ID of the user being commented on (or targeted user) is entered into box 215 and the transaction to which the comment is related is entered into box 220. The commenting user chooses the appropriate radio button as shown at 225 to indicate whether the comment is positive, neutral or negative. A free-form text comment is left in box 230 that can be up to 80 characters long. Finally, the comment is sent to the auction service for posting by clicking the "leave comment" box 235.

Once a comment is posted about a targeted user, that user may leave a responding comment to which the commenting user may respond. Since both the buyer and the seller may leave a comment with regard to a transaction, and respond to each other's comments and subsequently respond to each other responses, a total of up to six  
5 comments may be left for any single transaction.

Each comment is typically associated with the user making the comment and the user for whom the comment is intended, as well as the transaction to which the comment relates. Each comment must be stored in the auction service's storage devices. It can be appreciated that where a large number of auctions are regularly being concluded, the  
10 amount of storage space required to store all feedback comments is very large. For example, if the maximum of six 80-character comments are left for each transaction, approximately 0.5 kilobytes of storage space is necessary to store the comments. If it is considered that a service like eBay concludes tens of millions of auctions each year and that comments about particular users are stored for years, the amount of storage space is  
15 significant.

A feedback system as described above also presents several other problems:

(1) there is no efficient and convenient manner of translating comments into other languages, and (2) in certain jurisdictions, the auction service may face liability for publishing slanderous comments or comments with inappropriate content. In current  
20 feedback systems, a commenting user may leave a comment in any language he desires. For instance, a German user may purchase an item from a U.S. user and at the conclusion of the transaction, leave a comment about the U.S. user in German. This comment will have little meaning to other U.S. users who view the comments about the U.S. user unless

they read German. Essentially in this situation, the feedback system, at least partially, fails in its purpose of providing useful information to auction users about other users.

Given the sheer volume of comments left each day on a large system like eBay, it is impractical to screen every comment for slanderous or libelous language before posting the comment on the system for other users to read. Accordingly, users may leave inappropriate comments for other users, which may cause the auction service which published the comment to incur civil and/or criminal liability for the comment under the laws of certain states. For instance, the slander and libel laws of Great Britain are stricter than those in the United States, and in certain Muslim states, publishing comments containing language of an inappropriate nature may be viewed as illegal.

#### Summary Of The Invention

A method and apparatus utilized in operating a feedback forum wherein predefined feedback comments are provided to users of an e-commerce system are described. First, the feedback system receives a request from a first user to leave feedback concerning a second user. The feedback system generates a set of predefined feedback comments that are to be displayed to the first user, and each comment is associated with an identifier. Upon receipt of a response form the first user, the system identifies the selected predefined comment about the second user, and the system stores the indicator in a data structure that is associated with the second user.

Other features of the present invention will be apparent from the accompanying drawings and from the detailed description that follows.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is illustrated by way of example, and not by way of limitation, in the figures of the accompanying drawings and in which like reference numerals refer to similar elements and in which:

5           **Figure 1** is a prior art illustration of a web page listing of comments about a user of an Internet-based auction service.

**Figure 2** is a prior art illustration of an online feedback form that is utilized by one user to leave a comment about another user.

10           **Figure 3** is an illustration of an exemplary computer system on which three embodiments of the invention may be practiced.

**Figure 4** is an illustration of an Internet Auction Facility through which embodiments of the invention may be practiced.

**Figure 5** is an illustration of an exemplary database structure for an auction facility of Figure 4.

15           **Figures 6A and 6B** are a flowcharts listing an exemplary methodology for operating a feedback forum.

**Figures 7A and 7B** are illustrations of a feedback form that may be used by the winner of an Internet auction to leave feedback for the seller.

20           **Figures 8A and 8B** are illustrations of a feedback form that may be used by the seller to leave feedback for the winner of an Internet auction.

**Figure 9** is an illustration of a feedback form that may be used by a seller in an Internet auction to respond to a comment left about him by the winner of the auction.

**Figure 10** is a flowchart illustrating an alternative methodology of operating a feedback forum that incorporates both freeform and predefined feedback comments.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A method and apparatus are described to facilitate the operation of a feedback forum in an e-commerce environment wherein comments are selected by a user from a predefined set presented to the user, for example, as a menu. Compared with prior art feedback forums, embodiments of the invention facilitate the efficient use of storage space by storing the predefined comments a minimum number of times and providing indicators or pointers within the stored user's database records the comments made about the user. In another embodiment, the predefined comment may be translated into any number of different languages, and depending on an indication of a default or preferred language of a user viewing his comments or those of another user, the comments may be provided in the default or preferred language. Finally, since the comments are predefined, they can be written to avoid liability under the slander or other laws of various states.

In the following description, for the purposes of explanation, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. It will be apparent, however, to one skilled in the art that the present invention may be practiced without some of these specific details. In other instances, well-known structures and devices are shown in block diagram form.

The present invention includes various operations which will be described below.

The operations of the present invention may be performed by hardware components or may be embodied in machine-executable instructions, which may be used to cause a general-purpose or special-purpose processor programmed with the instructions to perform the operations. Alternatively, the operations may be performed by a combination of hardware and software.





by processor 302. Main memory 304 also may be used for storing temporary variables or other intermediate information during execution of instructions by processor 302.

Computer system 300 may also comprise a read-only memory (ROM) and/or other static storage device 306 coupled to bus 301 for storing static information and instructions for processor 302. A data storage device 307 such as a magnetic disk or optical disk and its corresponding drive may also be coupled to computer system 300 for storing information and instructions. In some architectures, a single memory device may perform the functions of two or more of the ROM 306, the main memory 304, and the mass storage device 307.

In other architectures such as might be implemented with a server, the system 300 might have multiple mass storage devices 307.

Computer system 300 can also be coupled via bus 301 to a display device 321 such as a cathode ray tube (CRT) or Liquid Crystal Display (LCD), for displaying information to an end user. Typically, an alphanumeric input device 322, including alphanumeric and other keys, may be coupled to bus 301 for communicating information and/or command selections to processor 302. Another type of user input device that may be included in the computer system 300 is a cursor control 323, such as a mouse, a trackball, a pen in conjunction with a touch sensitive screen, or cursor direction keys for communicating direction information and command selections to processor 302 and for controlling cursor movement on display 321.

A communication device 325 may also be coupled to bus 301. The communication device 325 may include a modem, a network interface card or other well-known interface devices, such as those used for coupling to Ethernet, token ring, or other types of physical attachment for purposes of providing a communication link to support a local or wide-area network. In this manner, the computer system 300 may be coupled to

a number of clients and/or servers via a conventional network infrastructure, such as the Internet.

It is appreciated that a lesser or more equipped computer system than the example described above may be desirable for certain implementations. Therefore, the configuration of computer system 300 will vary from implementation to implementation depending upon numerous factors, such as price constraints, performance requirements, technological improvements, and/or other circumstances.

It should be noted that while the operations described herein may be performed under the control of a programmed processor such as processor 302, in alternative embodiments, the operations may be fully or partially implemented by any programmable or hard-coded logic, such as Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs), TTL logic, or Application Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs). Additionally, the method of the present invention may be performed by any combination of programmed general-purpose computer components and/or custom hardware components. Therefore, nothing disclosed herein should be construed as limiting the present invention to a particular embodiment wherein the recited steps are performed by a specific combination of hardware components.

#### Exemplary Internet Auction Facility

Figure 4 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary network-based transaction facility in the form of an Internet-based auction facility 400 on which embodiments of the invention may be practiced. While exemplary embodiments of the invention are described within the context of an auction facility, it will be appreciated by those skilled

in the art that the invention will find application in many different types of e-commerce facilities.

The auction facility 400 includes one or more of a number of types of front-end servers, namely page servers 402 that deliver Web pages (e.g., markup language documents), picture servers 404 that dynamically deliver images to be displayed within Web pages, listing servers 406, CGI (Common Gateway Interface) or ISAPI servers 408 that provide an intelligent interface to the back-end of facility 400, and search servers 410 that handle search requests to the facility 400. E-mail servers 412 provide, *inter alia*, automated e-mail communications to users of the facility 400.

The back-end servers include a database engine server 414, a search index server 416, and a credit card database server 418, each of which maintains and facilitates access to a respective database 420, 422, 424.

The Internet-based auction facility 400 may be accessed by a client program 428 such as a browser (e.g., the Internet Explorer distributed by Microsoft Corp. of Redmond, Washington) that executes on a client machine 426 and accesses the facility 400 via a network such as, for example, the Internet 430. Other examples of networks that a client may utilize to access the auction facility 400 include a wide area network (WAN), a local area network (LAN), a wireless network (e.g., a cellular network), or the Plain Old Telephone Service (POTS) network.

#### Exemplary Internet Auction Database

Figure 5 is a database diagram illustrating an exemplary database 520 maintained by and accessed via the database engine server 514, which at least partially implements and supports the auction facility 400. The database 520 may, in one embodiment, be

implemented as a relational database, and includes a number of tables having entries or records that are linked by indices and keys. In an alternative embodiment, the database 514 may be implemented as a collection of objects in an object-oriented database.

Central to the database 520 is a user table 500, which contains a record for each user of the auction facility 400. A user may operate as a seller, buyer, or both within the auction facility 500. The database 520 also includes item tables 502 that may be linked to the user table 500. Specifically, the item tables 502 include a seller items table 504 and a bidder items table 506. A user record in the user table 500 may be linked to multiple items that are being, or have been, auctioned via the facility 400. A link indicates whether the user is a seller or a bidder (i.e., buyer) with respect to items for which records exist within the item tables 502.

The database 414 also includes a note table 508 populated with note records that may be linked to one or more item records within the item tables 502 and/or to one or more user records within the user table 500. Each note record within the note table 508 may include, *inter alia*, a description, history or other information pertaining to an item being auctioned via the auction facility 400 or to a user of the auction facility 400.

Also linked with the user table is one or more feedback tables 512 which contain information about comments made by and about each user of the auction facility 400. It is within this set of tables that indicators that are linked to the predefined comments about a particular user are stored. Additionally, each indicator may be cross-referenced with regard to the transaction number to which the comment relates, as well as the user who made the comment.

A number of other tables may be linked to the user table 500 including, but not limited to, a user past aliases table 510, a bids table 516, an accounts table 518, an account balances table 520, and a transaction record table 522.

## 5 An Exemplary Feedback Forum Methodology

Figures 6A and 6B are flow diagrams illustrating an exemplary methodology 600 for a feedback forum in which comments may be left for users of an e-commerce system such as the Internet auction facility 400 described *supra*. It is to be noted that embodiments of the invention are not limited to application in online auction environments alone, but may be implemented in any e-commerce system in which users of the system interact.

In block 610 of Figure 6A, the Internet auction facility 400 receives a request from a user to leave feedback for another user. If the user has just concluded an auction for an item and is either the successful bidder or the seller, he is prompted when viewing the items auction web page to leave feedback for the other user(s) involved in the auction. If the user chooses the prompt, typically displayed as an icon, the Internet auction facility 400 will send the user a markup language feedback forum page for display on the user's computer as indicated in block 610. Alternatively, a user may enter proceed from any one of the Internet auction facility 400 web pages he is currently viewing into the feedback forum by clicking the appropriate icon or hypertext link.

Figures 7A and 7B are illustrations of exemplary feedback forms that may be displayed to the user from which the user may choose a comment. It is understood, however, that many types of alternative feedback forms are contemplated as would be obvious to one skilled in the art with the benefit of this disclosure.

Figure 7A is a form that may be displayed to a successful bidder. Typically, if the feedback forum is entered from an auction page for a particular item and the successful bidder is already known to the auction facility, the feedback form will be returned with most of the particulars of the auction filled in. If the bidder enters the feedback forum from another link, he may have to fill in the information in the form including his ID and password, the targeted user's ID, and the transaction number to which the comment relates. The form may list the seller of the item as shown in blocks 710 and 723. It may list the item which was the subject of the auction as shown in 720, as well as listing the transaction number of the auction as shown in block 721. The successful bidder would be prompted to enter his user password and user ID (if not already filled in) in blocks 713 and 711 respectively. The form will include a list of predefined comments from which the bidder may pick one comment about the seller (in other embodiments more than one comment may be selected). The comments are contained within three drop-down boxes 730-732, one box containing positive comments, one box for neutral comments, and another for negative comments. In other embodiments, the predefined comments may be listed in any conceivable manner such as, but not limited to, check boxes, single drop-down boxes for all comment types, lists with radio buttons, and list boxes with scroll bars. Once the bidder has selected a comment and entered in his password, he may send the comment to the auction facility for posting by selecting the "Submit Comment" button 840.

Drop-down boxes 830-832 in their expanded form are illustrated in Figure 8B. A variety of comments are contained within each box. To maintain a level of variety, the auction facility 400 may, on a periodic basis, change the content of the comments available to a user. In some embodiments as shown in blocks 841 and 843, the comments

may have fields that fill in the appropriate name of a user and/or item when displayed.

Ideally, the predefined comments are written and selected by the auction facility administrators to: (1) minimize potential liability to the auction facility for slander against the target user, and (2) minimize potential criminal and civil liability for publishing language considered inappropriate by the state in which it is viewed.

Figure 8A is a form that may be displayed to a seller who has just concluded an auction. Typically, if the feedback forum is entered from an auction page for a particular item and the seller is already known to the auction facility, the feedback form will be returned with most of the particulars of the auction filled in. If the seller enters the feedback forum from another link, he may have to fill in the information in the form including his ID and password, the targeted user's ID, and the transaction number to which the comment relates. The form may list the successful bidder for the item as shown in blocks 850 and 863. It may list the item which was the subject of the auction as shown in 860, as well as listing the transaction number of the auction as shown in block 861. The successful bidder would be prompted to enter his user password and user ID (if not already filled in) in blocks 851 and 853 respectively. The form may include a list of predefined comments from which the seller may pick one comment about the successful bidder (in other embodiments more than one comment may be selected). The comments are contained within three drop-down boxes 870-872, one box containing positive comments, one box for neutral comments, and another for negative comments. A variety of comments may be contained within each of the boxes as shown in Figure 8B and the comments may include fields that substitute the name of the item or user when being displayed. In other embodiments, the predefined comments may be listed in any conceivable manner such as, but not limited to, check boxes, single drop-down boxes for



all comment types, lists with radio buttons, and list boxes with scroll bars. Once the seller has selected a comment and entered in his password, he may send the comment to the auction facility for posting by selecting the "Submit Comment" button 880.

In one embodiment of the invention, the forms of Figures 7A and 8A including the predefined comments are displayed in a user's preferred language or a default language associated with a user. The display language may be determined based on a registered user's listed language preference, or it may be based on the language of the state associated with the site through which the user is registered. Because the comments are predefined, identical versions of the comments may be provided in a variety of language choices.

Referring to Figure 6A, after the comment is received by the Auction facility 400, it is associated with the target user in block 615. Additionally, in alternative embodiments the comment may also be associated with transaction record and/or the user making the comment. In a preferred embodiment, the comment is only stored in one or at most a few locations within mass storage of the Internet auction facility 400. In block 620, a pointer or indicator unique to the comment along with additional information relating to the user commenting and the transaction involved are stored within the targeted users database record.

After the comment has been stored with the targeted user's database record, it may be retrieved for viewing. Typically, any user of the auction facility can access a listing of comments made about a particular user through links provided throughout web pages associated with the auction facility 400. When a request is made to see the comments about a targeted user, the comment indicators stored within the targeted user's database record are retrieved. The comments associated with the indicators are then

retrieved from storage as shown in block 625 in the preferred or default language of the user requesting to view the comments. The comments are then transmitted to the user in a format similar to the format presented in prior art Figure 1 for display.

In the preferred embodiment, the targeted user may respond to a comment made about him. Figure 6B is a flow chart showing the methodology followed by an exemplary feedback forum when a target user requests to respond to a comment about him. The forum receives the request to respond in block 635. In block 640, a response comment form such as the one illustrated in Figure 8 is sent to the target user for display on his computer. If the targeted user is known (i.e., he has signed in with the auction facility), the form, the comment to which he is responding and the predefined response comment choices will all be displayed in the user's preferred language. Alternatively, the form and associated predefined comments may be displayed in the default language associated with the domain suffix of the national site through which he entered the auction facility (e.g., auctionfacility.jp.com would indicate that the form should be displayed in Japanese).

The representative response comment form as shown in Figure 9 is similar to the forms of Figures 7A and 8A except for the choices of predefined comments available to the targeted user. In a preferred embodiment, the list of predefined response comments 910 relate directly to the nature of the comment 905 made about the targeted user. For instance, if the comment left about the targeted user was that the item he sold was packaged improperly, then the response comments might respond only to the manner in which the item was packaged. Once the targeted user has chosen a response comment, he may send it to the auction facility by clicking the "Submit Response" button.

Upon receipt of the response comment choice as shown in block 645 of Figure 6B, an indicator for the response comment is linked to the comment to which it is a response and stored in the targeted user's database record in 650. At the request of a user to view the comment written about the targeted user, the response comment is retrieved from storage based on its indicator along with the related comment and displayed to the user in the language associated with the user in block 655 and 660. Typically, the response comments will be displayed next to or underneath the comment to which it relates.

In the preferred embodiment, the commenting user is given an opportunity to respond to the targeted user's response to his initial comment. The methodology involved in such a response is similar to that discussed above in reference to Figure 6B.

#### An Alternative Feedback Forum Methodology

In some instances, it may be desirable to retain the free-form comment methodology currently utilized in the prior art. Limiting a user's comments to only predefined choices is somewhat restrictive and may not in many cases provide the degree of information content that a free-form comment might. For example, a free-form comment expressing rage and dissatisfaction, perhaps through the use of profanity or other strong words, might act as a stronger deterrent to a prospective bidder from bidding on a product being auctioned by the user about whom the comment was left than a rather sanitized comment stating the condition of an item was less than what it was represented as.

On the other hand, any advantages that may be associated with free-form comments may be outweighed by the detrimental effects related to the content of the free-

form comments. For example, the auction facility may be liable for slander to a user resident of certain jurisdictions having strict slander laws. Additionally, in certain states such as certain Islamic nations, the auction facility may be subject to civil and criminal penalties for publishing comments with content that is considered inappropriate in those states.

The Figure 10 is a flow chart of a method of operating a feedback forum in which a user is able to leave a free-form comment unless he or the target user of the comment are residents or are associated with states in which publishing free-form comments may subject the auction facility to civil or criminal liability. In Figure 10, the default behavior of the feedback forum is to allow the user to leave a free-form comment, however a feedback forum in which the default behavior allows the user to leave predefined comments is also contemplated unless it is verified the commenting user and the targeted user are from certain states.

In block 1005, the auction facility receives a request from a user to leave a comment about a targeted user. In block 1010, the auction facility system determines whether the commenting user and the targeted user are known. For instance, if the commenting user is a seller, he may click on a leave a comment button from within a transaction page for an item he has auctioned. In this case, the system would know the names of the users and the particular transaction number related to the item. Assuming the names of the users are known, the system determines whether either user is from a select set of states with strict slander or content laws in block 1015. If either user is from or associated with the select set of states, the user is sent a feedback form with predefined comment choices in block 1020. A typical form would be similar to the illustration of

Figure 7A. The feedback processing would then follow the processing as described *supra* with regard to Figures 6A and 6B as indicated in block 1025.

Referring back to block 1010, if the system is unable to verify the identities of either user as would be the case if the commenting user entered the feedback forum from a link other than the link listed on a page related to a particular auction, the user is sent the standard free-form feedback form as shown in prior art Figure 2. After the user fills out the form by entering the free-form comment, his ID and password, the ID of the target of the comment, and the item transaction number, and sends the form to the auction facility, the auction facility system determines whether either identified user is from the select set of states in block 1040. If either is, the user is sent a feedback form with predefined comment choices as illustrated in Figure 7A. If neither is from the select set of states, the comments are posted to the target user's database record for review by other users as indicated in block 1045.

Referring back to block 1015, if the neither user is from the select set of states, the Figure 2 free-form feedback form is sent to the user and is processed using prior art techniques as indicated in blocks 1050 and 1055.

In the foregoing specification, the invention has been described with reference to specific embodiments thereof. It will, however, be evident that various modifications and changes may be made thereto without departing from the broader spirit and scope of the invention. For instance, in the embodiments of the invention described above, markup language documents are utilized in the display of comments and comment selection options to the client, it is to be noted that other types of interfaces visual or audio are contemplated as would be obvious to one skilled in the art. Furthermore, the embodiments have been described in terms of an auction facility, however it is

contemplated that the feedback forum might be utilized in other types of e-commerce forums where information about users of the system would be useful. The specification and drawings are, accordingly, to be regarded in an illustrative rather than a restrictive sense.